Accommodating for ‘Difference’: Developing a Context for Arts Practice in Shanghai

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Abstract One of the main reasons why misunderstandings occur between Chinese and western arts managers could be attributed to the differences in perception between the two cultures. The aim of this paper is to encourage Western arts managers to consider the power of culture and perception, and the impact of this on work performance, when working in a Chinese city such as Shanghai. This paper argues that in order for Western arts managers to work more effectively in Shanghai it is essential that there is both an acknowledgement and acceptance of difference between Chinese and Western cultures, subsequently requiring a different way of thinking and doing things. Furthermore, this difference manifests itself in the work environment in the way the two cultures construct their own definition of reality. For this reason it is important that Western arts managers not only develop an understanding of Chinese traditional and contemporary culture, but that they also explore the appropriateness and value of their own Western training and experience in reference to its application in Shanghai.

Biography Since 1999 Joy has worked on various arts cross-cultural collaborations between China and Western Australia. Joy is currently based in Shanghai where she lectures on Arts Management and works on developing cross cultural exchange programs/activities for The College of Fine Arts, as well as having her own professional practice.

Introduction

According to Rogoff there appears to be a rising concern amongst cultural theorists, that there is something critically wrong with ethnocentric nationalism, in that it attempts to construct an internalised and pure form of culture that at best, can only produce artificial boundaries that are hard to sustain (1998). The globalisation of Western management culture can be read therefore as an act of ethnocentric nationalism. In undertaking cross culture and joint venture business relationships with non-western countries like China, Western management culture implants, consciously or not, its own theories and work methodologies on both organizations and individuals that come from very different cultural backgrounds. In this sense Western trained arts managers’ first experiences when working in a different country, may inadvertently lead them to believe that their business conduct is more professional than their non-western colleagues.

At the root of Western arts management theory are two fundamental, but often unspoken principles, self-responsibility and accountability. For this reason, the adoption of Western management practices in a collectivist society such as China raises some important questions.

These questions should be taken into consideration prior to developing any such management practices. Such as, do Chinese people desire more personal responsibility and accountability in their workplace? Are Chinese organisational management structures capable of supporting such acts of individuality? Can the...
Western arts manager as the outsider in Chinese culture, continue to practice their profession in the same manner that they have in their home country? Western arts management theory may have its place in China; nevertheless, the central issue of debate should be, in what form and how can it be appropriately translated and adapted? There is little benefit to be obtained by implementing Western management systems that foreground the need for self-responsibility and accountability, in cultures that cannot hope to accommodate or sustain such practices. As mentioned by Radbourne and Fraser, in order to develop and facilitate cultural exchange between countries, it is necessary that arts managers nurture and acquire a deeper understanding of the cultural framework of Asian countries (Radbourne & Fraser 1996: 249). The focus of this paper is to argue that in order for Western arts managers to develop and facilitate a successful working relationship with their Chinese colleagues in Shanghai, it is essential that they acknowledge and respect ‘difference’ in terms of how work is performed within a cultural framework and context. That adaptation to a way of doing things (the process), should and must always be, actively undertaken amongst all partners within any given cross-cultural working environment (Berger 1998).

Ethnocentric behaviour as a cultural norm

When arts managers cross national and cultural boundaries they naturally invite personal apprehension and confusion, attempting to construct meaning and understanding out of what they initially perceive to be an alien culture; Shanghai is no exception to this phenomenon. It is easy for people from a different culture to make an incorrect assumption that people who think and perform their work differently to themselves, are automatically wrong or incompetent; however, there is a very strong reason why most individuals tend to think this way and this reason is culture (Berger 1998). As individuals we are each born into a particular culture. In an active but also subliminal sense, culture determines our thinking, belief systems, behaviour patterns and person; both consciously and unconsciously we see the world through our own culture. Culture is something we learn from our earliest memories of childhood. Embedded in our traditional heritage culture affects all aspects of the society we live in (Fan 1995). By acknowledging the power culture has upon each and every individual, to some large degree we can argue that, if our earliest perceptions and ideas are moulded by our own culture, then it logically follows that our own culture enforces us to see and measure ‘others’ in reference to our own cultural understanding and experiences. Thus an ethnocentric perspective on all things is a naturalised state of being for all individuals and is a fundamental aspect of the human condition. Triandis argues that it is only when we begin to interact and have relationships with people from different cultures, that, we can start to perceive that we are ethnocentrically centred; however, knowing we are ethnocentrically biased is not enough. We only become less ethnocentric by training and exposing ourselves to see other cultures through their eyes rather than our own (Triandis 1995: 145).

The challenge for every Western arts manager who works in a non-western culture such as Shanghai, is how to become less ethnocentric in their work practice. Traditionally most management professionals have been trained and have worked within a mono cultural environment (Berger 1998). Although this is no longer true of most contemporary societies, effort is still required to ignore the natural inclination to transfer the skills learnt and used in the country of origin, when working in a new cultural working environment (Berger 1998). To do this requires not only that Western arts managers develop a deeper understanding and insight into Chinese culture and organizational management practice, but that they also learn to appreciate the resultant differences. The realisation that one’s own way of doing things is not necessarily the right way is the best way to begin when working with another culture (Berger 1998) and can be the difference between failure and success. This necessitates an acknowledgement of the power of culture and its influence upon arts managers thinking, work performance and decision making skills. According to Bennett in his paper, “A developmental approach to training for intercultural sensitivity” - effective cross cultural management calls for a need for all countries to change from ethnocentrism to cultural relativity and that this change is not possible without an
understanding of, and interaction with other cultures (Ramsoomair 1997). For Western arts managers it becomes imperative that they understand the working environment in which Chinese arts organizations and Chinese managers function and from this foundation develop the most appropriate work methods.

**Context versus Content**

Each arts manager’s interpretation of reality is different because of his or her different life experiences and perceptions. Internal factors such as psychological and genetic makeup and the external socio/cultural environment assist both the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind to construct and make sense of its own existence. Consequently misunderstandings between Chinese and Western arts managers can be attributed to the differences between each cultures construction and perception of reality. The Chinese perception of reality is moulded by the notion that we function within a contextual working environment. That is we work and behave according to the environment and/or situation we find ourselves in. For example Chinese people, like other collectivist societies described by Triandis, use the ‘read my mind approach’ when they are communicating with other people; they place emphasis on the context of the message i.e. the person’s posture, gestures, tone of voice are all constantly monitored to interpret what is being said, rather than on the content of what is actually being said (Triandis 1995: 76). It could be said that certain work situations in China can be low on content and relatively high on context (Dutton 1998: 57). The fact that there is an emphasis on the context of communication within the Chinese management system actively discourages a rationalised approach to work behaviour and personal conduct (Dutton 1998: 57). This form of communication system tends to dominate the Chinese psyche thereby foregrounding a preference for perception rather than the use of reason (Dutton 1998: 56). However, one should not confuse ‘reason’ with ‘reasonable’ as in making common sense. The Chinese are inclined to favour the use of common sense when attempting to solve problems. Known as the ‘Doctrine of the Golden Mean’ it is a central principle of Confucian ideology. A man should try to be reasonable not just a reasoning being. Chinese principles place ‘reasonableness’ on a higher level than ‘reason’ (Fan 2001: 18). Confucius teachings emphasis that reason is connected to concepts that are abstract, analytical, idealistic and veer towards the logical position; whereas the spirit of reasonableness is focused upon being realistic, more human as in humanism; that is in having a closer relationship with reality and in connection with the understanding of the right time and place. The fundamental structure of Chinese culture is built upon these principles (Fan 2001: 19). Thus it becomes imperative for the Western arts manager to constantly monitor if their assumptions are correct or appropriate within a given situation.

Before considering the possibility of introducing Western management models into the Chinese work environment, it is important that Western arts managers understand Chinese management systems, Chinese culture and Chinese psychological processes (Hampel 2001). Chinese arts managers work in a very different context to those of their western counterparts. The contextual environment for traditional Chinese management practice is guided by socio-cultural and political factors with less emphasis on economic factors (Branine 1996). The mind set of the Chinese arts manager could be viewed as context based, in so much as they place a higher value on the actual environment they are working in, especially in regard to placing relationships first. In China the cultural norm is to achieve group interconnectedness and harmony, thus emphasis is placed upon the person’s relationship within the group rather than the person as an individual (Wah 2001; Kim and Nam1998). In this respect Western arts managers may sometimes feel both frustrated and compromised in some aspects of their work practice in China. Western arts manager do not place so much significance on personal relationships, but rather they are trained to measure performance in terms of outcomes rather than personal characteristics (Hampel 2001). Western arts managers tend to be more bias towards content orientated work practices, such as highly detailed planning and organising. The Chinese on the other hand when undergoing negotiations prefer to spend most of their time discussing generalities. They do not get down to discussing the specifics of a project until the last moment, when concessions sometimes have to
be made (Triandis 1995: 128).

It is important for Western arts managers to be aware of the high regard the Chinese place on maintaining good relationships; to appreciate the impact this will have upon any work they undertake together and that consequently to retain good relationships and move projects forward, concessions may be requisite. Western arts manager need to understand the significance of concessions within a Chinese context. This requires an acknowledgment of not only differences between Chinese and Western culture but that this difference is also present in the two respective work practices, work ethics and sense of perception.

A Society in Transition

In general, traditional cultural values shape the norms and standards of any society and provide the foundation through which all individuals within that society are judged (Ying 2000). Although not all members of a society will necessarily share or maintain the same cultural values, they will view them as being representative of what is ideal within that culture (Ying 2000). In respect to Shanghai this is problematic. Shanghai’s history as a major Chinese city is very short, nevertheless its core cultural attributes can be traced backed through a four thousand year heritage of traditional Chinese cultural values and philosophy that provides the very backbone of how work is organised and performed. Chinese management systems can be defined as:

- highly centralised in respect to decision making processes;
- having a relatively low orientation towards specific task allocations;
- providing leadership that is paternalistic;
- having a strong emphasis on collectivism and group behaviour (Wah 2001).

Shanghai for more than the last decade has been undergoing an extreme and accelerated period of change and growth. Consequently, the metamorphosis of modern Shanghai society, induced by both globalisation and modernisation, is having an enormous impact on daily life and the Chinese people’s sense of ‘self’. This current form of global modernization with it’s externalised awareness and focus on sense of place, boundary and interconnection of all societies has brought to an end China’s preoccupation with self-focus and self explained modernity (Gao 1998).

As a rapidly expanding city, the traditionally perceived cultural norms of Shanghai society are being challenged considerably. According to Triandis, under normal circumstances as population density increases, the closeness between people increases, resulting in collectivism. However in the case of urbanisation there is a mixed effect. As density increases so does an individual’s range of choices. If this latter aspect is the dominant factor, it produces a stronger relationship with individualism (Triandis 1995: 100). Shanghai is a city undergoing such transformation. The constant pressure of globalisation and consumerism is shifting Shanghai society’s personal consciousness, from a sense of ‘other’ to a more pronounced sense of ‘individualism’. For Western arts managers this can be very confusing in how they are able to assess and adapt to their new working environment. It becomes exceedingly difficult to negotiate one’s sense of place in a work environment that manifests both an innate collective consciousness in how things are done and perceived and yet also displays a rapidly advancing subjective nature, in its personal desires and appetite for modernisation, on a scale that is difficult to comprehend or predict. The transitional period between these two extremes can make the cross-cultural working environment even more difficult to negotiate, as it suggests such a stronger element of unpredictability. No matter how well a culture is studied and documented, there are always going to be individuals and circumstances that prove to be the exception to the rule. It becomes of vital importance for Western arts managers not only to develop an understanding of Chinese traditional and contemporary culture, but also to construct and conceptualise meaning from the constant changes and transitional phases of Chinese society, as it moves from a traditional collective orientated culture towards a more subjective individualistic culture.
From a surface perspective, one could be forgiven for thinking that this form of transitional activity is a contradiction in terms of China's traditional cultural roots. It is important not to make the assumption that in the Chinese mind 'modernised' necessarily means 'westernised'. According to Tung the Chinese believe that they can change their management structure without changing their culture (Branine 1996). For new theories to gain acceptance in the Chinese world they need to be tried, tested and measured for compatibility with Chinese classical and traditional models (Fan 2001: 16). Chinese intellectuals have been debating the nature of Chinese modernity for nearly a century. Until the 1980's Chinese modernity could be viewed as self-protective, in that Chinese theory and methodologies were developed to counter affect the influences of the western world (Gao 1998). For this reason it is important to note that a change in management systems in Shanghai may not necessarily mean a change to western standards and methodologies, but rather a change in Chinese terms.

Conclusion

Whilst it is possible for Western arts managers to work and practice their craft in a Chinese city such as Shanghai, it is not always possible as an outsider for them to be able to view Chinese culture from within in the true sense. Cross cultural researchers Easterby-Smith and Malina suggest an outsider's previous experience of the world does not provide them with the necessary foundation from which they are able to make sense of events in the same way as insiders would (Easterby-Smith & Malina 1999). Outsiders can only ever claim the position of cultural voyeur when attempting to understand or explain another culture (Rogoff 1998). However this does not mean that Western arts managers should make no attempt, but rather acknowledge that there are limitations to how far an outsider can understand all aspects of another culture. Therefore, the first step for both Western and Chinese arts managers, could be to move beyond their own culturally conditioned way of thinking, experiencing and perceiving the world, and make a passionate attempt to examine each others’ culture and way of doing things, taking into consideration that not all things are necessarily fully knowable or absolute truths. By exploring another culture and examining the differences between the two, knowledge and understanding can be provided about each culture while also revealing a deeper sense of self-knowledge and self-awareness. If both Chinese and Western arts managers accommodate for ‘difference’, there is then the possibility to explore and develop cross cultural working relationships and management practices, that are mutually complimentary and interconnected.

References


